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In the Midst of Imperfections: Burmese Buddhists and Business Ethics

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In the Midst of Imperfections: Burmese Buddhists and Business Ethics

Pyi Phyo Kyaw¹

Abstract

This article looks at interpretations by Buddhists in Burma of right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*) and documents the moral reasoning that underlies their business activities. It explores different ways in which Buddhists in Burma, through the use of Buddhist ethics and practices, resolve moral dilemmas that they encounter while pursuing their livelihood. I give a brief summary of the existing scholarship on Buddhist economics and on economic action in Burma, exemplified by the work of E. F. Schumacher and Melford Spiro respectively. In so doing, I wish to highlight

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a difference between the approaches of the existing scholarship and that of this article: the existing scholarship analyzes economic issues from the perspective of normative ethics; this research analyzes them from the perspective of descriptive ethics, looking at how Buddhists interpret and apply Buddhist ethics in their business activities, in the midst of moral, social, and economic imperfections. The research presented draws on semi-structured interviews and fieldwork conducted in Burma in the summer of 2010 and relates the interpretations given to the relevant Buddhist literature, the textual authorities for doctrines such as morality (*sīla*).

Introduction

Buddhists in Burma encounter moral dilemmas while acquiring their livelihoods because the Burmese political economy,² like that of any other place in the world, has many political, social, and economic imperfections. Ideally, every Buddhist precept and every aspect of Buddhist morality would be observed in all business decisions and activities, regardless of the social and economic situation. In practice, such a state of ideal morality rarely if ever exists. There is a gap between the moral principles of individuals and their actual behavior. In order to understand the

² The term political economy is the original name of what is now known as economics. Although it was originally rooted in the discipline of moral philosophy, a transition to empirically-based analysis of economic actions has been made since Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, first published in 1776 (Bertram). Today, political economy is subject to multiple understandings. In this article, it refers to a branch of social science that studies the relationships between individuals and society, and between markets and the state, taking into account of political, social, economic, and moral factors.

relationship between Buddhism and business activities in the real world, we need to examine how people actually behave and why they behave in the way that they do. This article explores the ways in which Burmese Buddhists use Buddhist teachings and practices to reconcile moral dilemmas encountered in their business activities.

The account given in this article draws on conversations and fieldwork conducted in lower Burma from June to August 2010. The business organizations I visited included a medium-sized wholesale business and some small businesses, both trading in agricultural products such as rice, beans, and pulses. My research also included interviews with people working in industries such as food production, hotels, and gambling and entertainment; I also interviewed monks and nuns.³

In total, I interviewed forty-five people, using heterogeneous purposive sampling (Saunders 237-240). I selected a diverse range of businesses and individuals that enabled me to describe and explicate their interpretations of right livelihood and the moral reasoning that underlies their business activities. Although the sample of forty-five people cannot be considered to be statistically representative of the total population, the patterns that emerged from the data are of particular interest and represent the key themes of this article.

It should be noted that my research in 2010 did not include big business conglomerates in Burma, which are owned and run by military personnel, their family members, and their close associates.⁴ Further-

³ I have maintained the anonymity of the respondents and of their business organizations.

⁴ Ford et al. (2016) have done a study of the emergence and the flourishing in Burma of large business conglomerates, which enjoy close personal connections with, and the patronage of, military personnel, typical characteristics of cronyism. Their article high-

more, the data and the analysis of such data presented here specifically reflect the political and economic climate of Burma in the summer of 2010 when the political transition from the military government to a nominally civilian government was beginning. Since then, Burma has made some progress in terms of political reform: in the 2015 election, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, won a majority in both houses of parliament, ending military rule.⁵ Despite these political developments, my description, provided below, of the tax system and the corruption in Burma paints a picture that remains true.

Previous Approaches to Buddhist Business Ethics

Buddhism and business often have a reputation of being mutually exclusive. In the late 19th century, Max Weber, comparing the Calvinist society of the West with less economically developed Asian countries, took the view that economic development and commercial interests were at odds with the pursuit of the Buddhist path. For him, Buddhism, like other Asian religions, lacks key values of capitalism, such as diligence, and the appropriate use of capital by investing and saving, which promote the accumulation of wealth and economic growth (Harvey 206-207). Although Weber acknowledged that the laity's motivation to have a surplus of wealth to use in generating good karma stimulated economic activity, in his view this motivation did not support capitalist reinvestment (Harvey 207).

lights how these large conglomerates are beginning to transform themselves from cronyism to oligarchy with enhanced autonomy from their political patrons.

⁵ One of my respondents recently said that the military retains control over some ministries such as the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry for Border Affairs.

Moreover, Weber saw early Buddhism as having an other-worldly ideal with “the technology of a contemplative monkhood” and “unambiguous moral rules” for the monks (215), which devalued the world and its drives. He also viewed that early Buddhism lacked a clear methodical lay morality to be the basis of a rational economic ethic (218), and that advice to the laity was “later and gradually developed into a sort of lay ethic” (215). For him, there is no true reconciliation between the worldly and monastic ethic (217-218). This Weberian logic would imply that there is a fundamental contradiction between the right livelihood for monastics, on one hand, and that for laypeople, on the other.

Drawing on Pandita’s critique of Weber’s analysis of the Buddhist teachings, I wish to propose that there is no real contradiction between them (*Intention* 6). In the *Pāṭimokkha* rules, if a monk or a nun accepts gold and silver, or engages in various types of monetary exchange or trade, these are monastic offences requiring forfeiture and confession. Furthermore, the term *bhikkhu/bhikkhunī* is defined as “almsman/alms-woman” or “mendicant,” who depends on the laity for their material needs. This relationship of “right livelihood” between monastics and laypeople incurs responsibilities: the monastics must receive and use offerings in the right way, whereas the lay supporter should make material offerings in the right way and receive the Buddhist teachings in the right way (*Bhikkhu Ariyesako*). In this case, the “right way” means that the layperson with intention to do wholesome karma makes a living in accordance with Buddhist teachings and gives material support to a monk or a nun. The monastics properly receive and use the offerings in their pursuit of Dhamma learning (*pariyatti*) or/and Dhamma practice (*paṭipatti*) so that they can eventually reciprocate with the highest of gifts, i.e., Dhamma.

Although it is wrong to do business for monastics, there is no moral ground that prevents laypeople from doing business activities

righteously. In fact, numerous Pāli texts such as the *Pattakamma-sutta* (AN 4.61), the *Anana-sutta* (AN 4.62), and the *Aputtaka-sutta* (SN 3.19) highlight appropriate acquisition and use of wealth. The appropriate use of wealth, as discussed in the *Pattakamma-sutta*, includes giving offerings to relations, guests, dead relatives, gods and virtuous renunciants and brahmins (Harvey 191). In the *Anana-sutta*, the Buddha teaches Anāthapindika, a wealthy merchant (*seṭṭhi*) in Savatthi, about the bliss of acquiring wealth righteously and how to make merit by using it properly. It does not mean that the Buddha was contradicting what he taught monks and nuns. As Pandita highlights, it was the Buddha's job to teach his followers—whether monastics or laypeople—how to “achieve a silver lining” (*Intention* 8) in the midst of imperfections. Therefore, there is no real contradiction between the right livelihood for monastics and that for laypeople.

The early strand of literature on the relationship between Buddhism and economics was influenced predominately by Weberian analysis. Following Weber's framework, Melford Spiro (1966) analyzed Buddhism and economic action in Burma.⁶ Spiro concluded that the high degree of religious spending by Burmese is strongly motivated by the desire to gain merit (*Economic* 1170). This desire is based on the cognitive reasoning to improve one's status in the round of rebirth (*samsara*): “the Burmese *do* [his italics] save and invest intensively . . . [in] the form of religious contributions, whose returns are in the form of improved karma” (*Economic* 1171). Spiro argued that Buddhists, rather than striving to have better rebirths, should strive to achieve liberation, and that the de-

⁶ Like Spiro, Tambiah (1973) and Keyes (1983) writing on Buddhist approaches to economics in Thailand followed Weber's framework. See Choompolpaisal (2008) for how, prior to the 1980s, scholars of Buddhism adopted the Weberian analysis of Buddhism and thus saw Buddhism as otherworldly mysticism, apolitical, asocial, and non-capitalistic.

sire to improve future existences by performing religious spending (*dāna*), etc., is anti-Buddhist (*Economic* 1169–1170). Richard Gombrich, writing in the 1970s on Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka, also highlights the presence of the practice of merit-making amongst the Sri Lankan Buddhists (302). Gombrich, like Spiro, sees that it is the desire of Sri Lankan Buddhists to have a pleasant rebirth, rather than to attain liberation, that motivates them to perform positive actions and argues that the ethics of positive actions is not logical (293).

I wish now to assess whether the use of positive actions such as doing *dāna* as a way of resolving moral and social dilemmas of one's livelihood is consistent with the Buddha's teaching and the Buddhist worldview. Performance of positive actions is an important part of the practice of Buddhist morality (*sīla*). A Buddhist approach to morality consists of two aspects: *cāritta*, "keeping," and *vāritta*, "avoiding." The pair of *cāritta* and *vāritta* is included in the *Visuddhimagga* (usually translated as *The Path of Purification*) as one of nineteen kinds of virtue (Vism. I 25). In the section called the "Purification of Virtue," Buddhaghosa explains the two kinds of virtue as follows:

In the section dealing with two kinds: fulfilling a training precept announced by the Blessed One thus 'This should be done' is *keeping* [*cāritta*]; not doing what is prohibited by him thus 'This should not be done' is *avoiding* [*vāritta*] Herein, *keeping* is accomplished by faith and energy; *avoiding*, by faith and mindfulness. This is how it is of two kinds as keeping [positive action] and avoiding [negative behavior]. (Ñāṇamoli 15)

Bhikkhu Bodhi gives a contemporary interpretation that stresses the positive and negative aspects of morality. He highlights that each moral principle embraced under the Five Precepts contains two aspects: the rule of abstinence (*vāritta*) and the quality to be cultivated (*cāritta*) (*Pre-*

cepts 27). For instance, corresponding to the negative side of abstaining from stealing is the positive side of developing honesty and contentment.

The Buddhist path in terms of the ten perfections (*pāramī*) is propelled along by *dāna*, creating a virtuous circle. Starting with the perfection of generosity (*dāna-pāramī*), the first perfection of the path, a practitioner gradually progresses along the Buddhist path, ultimately achieving arhatship or Buddhahood.⁷ As Endo highlights, the importance of the sequential order of perfections is discussed in the Pāli commentaries (274). However, scholars taking a Weberian stance tend to overlook this textual evidence. By doing so, they perceive Buddhists' business activities and social behavior (such as the performance of positive actions) as inconsistent with Buddhist teachings and ethics. I do not share their view, and—as far as I can tell from interviews—Burmese Buddhists would not share such a view either.

Another strand of scholarship on Buddhist economics discusses issues related to macroeconomics, such as economic planning and policy. E. F. Schumacher, who was known as an economist with Fabian, Gandhian, and Buddhist sympathies, visited Burma in 1955 as an economic consultant for U Nu, the then president of the Union of Burma. In 1952, U Nu, with the help of an American team of economic experts and United Nations agencies, launched an eight-year economic development plan, known as the Pyidawtha Plan, "Pleasant Country," which ultimate-

⁷ There are ten perfections or qualities that are to be practiced and accumulated in order to achieve enlightenment. They are: (1) generosity (*dāna*); (2) morality (*sīla*); (3) renunciation (*nekkhamma*); (4) wisdom (*paññā*); (5) effort (*virīya*); (6) patience (*khanti*); (7) truthfulness (*sacca*); (8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*); (9) loving-kindness (*metta*); and (10) equanimity (*upekkhā*). Endo shows that the perfections can be practiced by disciples, too (280-284).

ly failed.⁸ Schumacher's task was to evaluate the work of Burma's American advisors and to make suggestions about the fiscal and trading position of Burma (Wood 245). Instead of being impressed with the capitalistic economic development plan recommended by the American economists, Schumacher became fascinated by how the Burmese then lived simply with few wants (245). He saw Burma as "a country with aspirations and ideals traditionally opposed to those of Western civilization, deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Buddhism" (246). He also realized that economic development in Burma required a different kind of economics from that of modern capitalism: a "Buddhist economics."

Schumacher discussed a Buddhist approach to economic development in a paper entitled "Buddhist Economics" in 1966, which he later included in his seminal book *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* (1973).⁹ In this work, Schumacher proposed an economic theory inspired by Buddhist teachings. He focused on humanistic aspects of economic activities, highlighting the problems with the modern economic system that relies on the use of modern technologies and the high rate of consumption of physical resources, including natural resources, to achieve continuous economic growth (39-41). He criticized modern technologies for their dehumanizing nature and their negative impact

⁸ The economic policies and development plans under the Nu government were inconsistent and chaotic. Although the Nu government received foreign aid, it used the rhetoric of self-help, i.e., independence from foreign influences, as well as Buddhist concepts in the Burmese version of the Pyidawtha Plan to promote it among rural cultivators, while publishing technical details of the economic plan in English for economists and informed elites. See Tharaphi Than (2014) for how the Nu government employed both Burmese and English languages to attract support from different audiences, and Walinsky (1962) for detailed discussions of the plan itself and its failures.

⁹ Schumacher initially conceived Buddhist economics in terms of the Gandhian economics, and wrote a paper entitled "Economics in a Buddhist Country" while he was in Yangon in 1955 (Wood 246-247).

on the psychology and morale of a workforce.¹⁰ For him, Buddhist economics is “a question of finding the right path of development, the Middle Way between materialist heedlessness and traditionalist immobility, in short, of finding Right Livelihood” (46), and that its aim is to obtain the maximum well-being with the minimum consumption (42).

Schumacher suggested that economic development from a Buddhist perspective is “good only to the point of sufficiency, beyond that, it is evil, destructive, uneconomic” (Wood 248). He wrote, “people who live in highly self-sufficient local communities are less likely to get involved in large-scale violence [over natural resources] than people whose existence depends on world-wide systems of trade” (Schumacher 43). He saw economic self-sufficiency as an ideal model because it aligns with his analysis of a Buddhist approach to economics, producing a sustainable pattern of consumption with moderate use of resources.¹¹ Moreover, he believed that Burma would benefit from a policy of economic self-sufficiency as it can protect a less-developed economy against the competitions of more advanced producers abroad (Wood 249), enabling its new industries to develop competitiveness, and achieving a successful economic development, if implemented well, for such an economy.¹² In

¹⁰ In Business Management literature, the disadvantages and implications of modern technologies on human work ethos and psychology have been highlighted since the 1940s. In particular, scholars such as Abraham Maslow in 1943 and Douglas McGregor in 1957 are pioneers in the field of human relations management theory.

¹¹ It should be noted that a large number of consumers, even striving for self-sufficiency with a sustainable pattern of consumption, would still use a large amount of resources. In economics, it is widely accepted that the use of natural resources, economic and social development, environmental conditions, and poverty are closely linked to population growth and distribution.

¹² What Schumacher suggested combines economic self-sufficiency with protectionism, two related economic concepts, as a way to develop the Burmese economy. In economics, a self-sufficient economy can survive without external assistance or international trade, although protectionist measures put barriers to the international flow of goods

his final report to the Burmese government in 1955, Schumacher therefore recommended the need to concentrate first on a degree of self-sufficiency with localized, small-scale production for the local population (Wood 249).

Although Schumacher saw economic self-sufficiency as ideal, it does not necessarily lead to beneficial economic and social outcomes. Economic policies that saw sweeping nationalization in all sectors of the Burmese economy under Ne Win's military government (1962-1988) were based on the principle of economic self-sufficiency, transforming Burma into a form of socialist autarky (Kyaw Soe Lwin 292). Despite the promises of Ne Win's military government to establish an economically sound socialist nation, it had not solved the economic and social problems by the end of its era. Instead, as in many communist states that collapsed in the 1980s, the military dictatorship saw the emergence of a privileged class of military personnel and their associated business elites thriving from monopolies and cronyism.

Big business conglomerates in Burma owned by these business elites operate in a wide range of industries from agriculture to telecommunication as near-monopolies (Ford et al. 19). These firms have the financial and economic power to negotiate lower prices from suppliers and to demand higher prices of consumers. In this instance, both suppliers and consumers suffer from the monopolistic behavior of these firms. According to a learned Burmese monk, the first Shwegyin Sayadaw Ven. Jāgara (1822-1894), awarding a monopoly to anyone is against the second Buddhist precept of refraining from stealing.¹³ Shwegyin Sayadaw rea-

and services. Temporary protection has been conceded by many economists to be useful as a means of encouraging new industries in a developing economy.

¹³ In 1860, King Mindon (r. 1853-1878) of the last dynasty of Burma consulted the first Shwegyin Sayadaw Ven. Jāgara regarding trade and tax policies (Htun Yee Vol. I: 61-68 and Vol. II: 5-10). There is a long tradition in Buddhism of monks acting as advisors to

soned that monopolistic behavior would prevent the poor from acquiring wealth (Dhammasāmi *Education* 112).¹⁴ Burma's pursuit of socialist autarky and its failures have shown us the very serious economic, social, and moral problems that can result from an extreme form of self-sufficient economic system.

Padmasiri De Silva in 1975 proposed "three value orientations" common to Buddhism and Schumacher's analysis (4). They are:

1. "Man-nature orientation" that promotes the development of a proper, healthy relationship with the natural world.
2. "Activity orientation" that "aims not at mere accumulation of wealth but at the psychological and moral satisfaction one gets by doing an honest job, and shedding one's ego-centered desires by identifying oneself with the aspirations and visions of a whole nation."
3. "Interpersonal-relationship orientation" that advocates mature and reciprocal relationships that can break through social barriers to economic progress. (9-10)

In so doing, he not only related Buddhist teachings to principles of Buddhist economics, but also criticized the Weberian model of Buddhist ethics.

the state. See Emanuel Sarkisyanz (1965) on the importance of the relationship between the state and the *Saṅgha* in the Burmese socio-political arena.

¹⁴ In a monopolistic market, the firm has control over price and/or quantity. It can demand a high price from consumers, or restrict the quantity of products produced. In both cases, consumers will suffer, either by having to pay high prices for products, or by having to forgo certain products. The poor, who are already at a disadvantage, are hit the hardest by monopolistic behavior.

Since the 1990s, scholars have combined textual studies and doctrinal analyses of Buddhism with the analysis of macroeconomic planning and economic activity of individuals. Their analyses of economic activities are from a normative perspective of Buddhist ethics. In 1990, Sizemore and Swearer edited a book that explored Theravada attitudes toward wealth. The Buddhist teachings applied to economics and development issues are apparent in the writings of Thai monks such as Ven. P. A. Payutto, and Burmese monks such as Oxford Sayadaw Ven. Dhammasāmi and Metta-shin Sayadaw Ven. Javana.

Recently, concurrent with this, scholars of both Buddhist Studies and Economics/Business Studies have taken a keen interest in the field of Buddhist Economics. “The Buddhist Economics Research Platform” was established in 2006 by the Business Ethics Center of the Corvinus University of Budapest and the East-West Research Institute of the Budapest Buddhist University, with an aim to connect people and institutes engaged in developing Buddhist economic theory and practice (Zsolnai *Buddhist Economics*). The credit crunch of 2007 and the subsequent global economic recession prompted scholars of both disciplines to review the present economic paradigm. For instance, in 2009, the Conference of International Council of United Nation Day of Vesak (ICUNDV) in Bangkok held a panel on the “Buddhist Approach to Economic Crisis.”

Burmese Buddhist Ethics: a Descriptive Approach

The strands of literature on Buddhist Economics mentioned above mainly take a normative approach to business ethics. A normative approach, taking account of Buddhist teachings and ethics, examines what the outcome of the economy or what the goals of economic and public policy ought to be, and lays out Buddhist attitudes to wealth and economic development of a nation. It therefore falls under the branch of text-based,

“normative ethics” (Harvey 2).¹⁵ Such a normative analysis provides a useful theoretical framework. However, it emphasizes theoretical aspects of creating an economic system and a business model in a vacuum, rather than examining how ethics are or are not addressed in the actual business practices of Buddhists.

In this article, I wish to go beyond this paradigm by analyzing actual economic behavior of Buddhists business people in modern Burma from the perspective of “descriptive ethics” (Harvey 2).¹⁶ This approach aims to describe and explain the moral reasoning that underlies the economic motivations and actions of businesses and individuals in Burma. To explore how my respondents’ economic behavior is informed, not only by scriptural interpretation, but by social, political, and economic factors, my analysis draws on relevant primary and secondary sources on Buddhist business ethics and Burmese Buddhism. The secondary sources include the works of some Burmese monks because my respondents’ economic actions are often informed by such works. In the process, this article seeks to expand how we understand the complexities of the relationship between the lived practices of Buddhism and business in the real world.

One difference between Buddhist morality and Buddhist ethics is this: we can think of the former as the set of Buddhist principles to guide

¹⁵ There are four major branches of ethics: (1) normative ethics provides guidance and direction in terms of making moral or ethical choices or living in morally acceptable ways; (2) descriptive ethics concerns how people actually behave; (3) applied ethics is about how moral outcomes can be achieved in specific situations; and (4) meta-ethics concerns the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions (Harvey 2).

¹⁶ The work of Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist, is an example of descriptive ethics. In his research in 1971, Kohlberg was interested how individuals would justify their actions if placed in moral dilemmas. His interest in morality and moral decisions is from the perspective of psychology.

adherents as to what is good and bad behavior, while the latter is a Buddhist's critical analysis, derived from their own knowledge and understanding of Buddhism, of moral issues and phenomena in a given social context. In an ideal world, Buddhist ethics would perfectly match Buddhist morality. However, in practice, such an ideal state of morality and ethics rarely exists. Therefore, this article takes various economic, social, cultural, and religious contexts of Burma into account. We thus consider that:

1. Buddhism is not asocial, apolitical, or anti-economical. In contrast to the Weberian view of Buddhism, it is defined in a broader sense, acknowledging the relevance of Buddhism to social, political, and economic issues.
2. For business people in Burma, there are economic, social, and cultural constraints within which business decisions have to be made.
3. Imperfections exist in the world. I use the word "imperfections" here in order to take the Noble Truth of Suffering into account, encapsulating the concept of *dukkha*, which is often translated as "suffering," "pain," or "dissatisfaction."¹⁷

These three conditions are interrelated. The first condition accounts for the centrality of Buddhism in the Burmese socio-political economy. The Buddhist socio-political worldview gives rise to various constraints that govern the business decisions of individuals. Constraints imply that not all stakeholders of a business—i.e., everyone affected by the business—

¹⁷ The Noble Truth of Suffering in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* (SN 56.11) is defined as follows: "Birth is pain; old age is pain; illness is pain; death is pain; sorrow and grief; physical and mental suffering; and disturbance are pain. Association with things not liked is pain; separation from desired things is pain; not getting what one wants is pain; in short, the five aggregates of grasping are pain" (Anderson 65).

will be satisfied by the decisions taken regarding that business. Economic constraints such as ad-hoc economic policies may create imperfections in two ways:

1. *Economic* imperfections: economies or markets that do not operate efficiently because of a lack of information, or unstable economic policies, or other exogenous factors such as foreign trade policies, world demand of export products and the political climate of the country;¹⁸
2. *Moral* imperfections: moral principles are not adhered to strictly because, in order to achieve their goals in business, people feel pressure to compromise their moral principles.

Both economic and moral imperfections reinforce the constraints by creating precedents.

Right Livelihood

Before we explore my respondents' views of right livelihood, I wish to present a variety of interpretations of right livelihood in the writings on Buddhist ethics. Informing the assessment of the relationship between Buddhist ethics and business is the notion of *sammā-ājīva*, "right livelihood," a constituent of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddhist path to the cessation of suffering, *Nibbāna*. The path constitutes eight factors: (1) right view; (2) right intention; (3) right speech; (4) right action; (5) right livelihood; (6) right effort; (7) right mindfulness; and (8) right concentration. The eight factors are also

¹⁸ A market where buyers or sellers can influence the market, and there is a lack of product information is called an "imperfect market." An imperfect market does not operate as smoothly and efficiently as it should do.

grouped into three aspects. Factors (1) and (2) pertain to wisdom (*paññā*); factors (3) to (5) pertain to morality (*sīla*); and factors (6) to (8) pertain to mental development (*samādhi*).

From a normative perspective, right livelihood involves a number of elements. Firstly, one should avoid the five types of *micchā-ājīva*, “wrong livelihood,” which is to say, one should not trade in weapons, living beings (such as in slavery and prostitution), meat, alcoholic drink, and poison (AN 5.177). As Harvey notes, wrong livelihood is also defined as any means of livelihood that is based on trickery or greed, as that would entail breaking the second precept, which forbids stealing either directly or by deception (188). Secondly, one’s means of livelihood should not be dishonest or otherwise cause suffering to other living beings. Finally, one should perform positive actions such as religious and social giving (*dāna*) and taking care of employees (Harvey 187-189). The main premise of right livelihood from a Buddhist perspective is that the highest priority is given to the ethics, not the profitability, of a business activity.

The view expressed above of right livelihood provides a definitive approach, dealing with cases that are morally unambiguous. Recent scholarship on Buddhist ethics concerning kingship, armies, and soldiery by Pandita (*Intention*), Kent, and Keown gives a more nuanced approach in assessing the morality of professions that are questionable from the perspectives of Buddhist ethics. Their approaches focus on the role of intentions (*cetanā*) associated with an action, and draw out the complexities of motivations and emotions that are linked to the use of force in military and governance. I do not wish to repeat their findings here, but I would like to highlight that my respondents also emphasize the intentions and motivations in their explanation of their livelihoods. I therefore draw on the works of Keown and Pandita when discussing the entertainment business (below).

Burmese Interpretations of Right Livelihood

The Burmese word *tha-ma-a-zi-wa* is a loan word from the Pāli *sammā-ājīva*. In Burmese, *sammā-ājīva* is generally understood as “good livelihood” in a sense of behaving with “good conduct” (*sucarita*). Thirty-seven percent of my respondents in Burma told me that *sammā-ājīva* is “making a living in a good way.” In terms of moral standards, people recognize the centrality of qualities such as “loving-kindness,” “honesty,” “straightforwardness,” “righteousness,” and “blamelessness” in one’s means of livelihood.¹⁹ Moreover, the concept of “non-harm” (*ahimsā*) plays an important role in the interpretation of *sammā-ājīva* amongst Buddhists in Burma. They explained that it entails not causing psychological or physical harm to oneself and to others while making a living. Some respondents explained that one’s means of livelihood should not bring harm to others but should bring them positive things.

In addition to the above interpretations, some of my respondents regard *sammā-ājīva* as doing business activities without breaking the Five Precepts of Buddhism. The Five Precepts, the group of moral instructions by which the laypeople should live, are abstaining from: taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants. My respondents acknowledged that, of the five, the fourth precept, abstaining from lying, is the easiest to break in the workplace and in daily life. A significant minority of my respondents explained that because they cannot avoid breaking the fourth precept in their workplaces and business activities, they do not regard their work as *sammā-ājīva*.

¹⁹ My respondents used the following Burmese terms to describe what *sammā-ājīva* means for them: *kaung-thaw-a-that-mway-mhu*, *myit-tar-shi-mhu*, *yo-tha-mhu*, *hpyaunt-mat-mhu*, *mhan-kan-mhu*, *a-pyit-kin-mhu*, *thu-myar-ko-ma-hti-hkite-mhu*.

Sammā-ājīva is also interpreted in Burma as simply avoiding of any mode of livelihood that is regarded as wrong livelihood. One of my respondents explained to me that *sammā-ājīva* involves neither selling nor producing alcohol or meat. What is also seen as wrong livelihood includes those that necessitate breaking the second precept, i.e., stealing either directly or by deception. It is in this context that people who are involved in the gambling industry in one way or another are regarded by the Burmese as having wrong livelihood. According to them, gambling is furthermore associated with greed, desiring money and wealth of others unduly. According to Ven. Javana, one gambles because of “unrighteous greed” (*visama-lobha*), which stems from laziness (120). The *Vatthūpama-sutta* (MN 7) says that *visama-lobha* is one of the 16 defilements of the mind. Although *visama-lobha* may lead to gambling, it does not necessarily mean that gambling is unethical. It may or may not entail breaking the precepts and may or may not cause suffering to oneself and others. However, the *Sigālovāda-sutta* (DN 31) highlights the social ills associated with gambling.

There are these six dangers attached to gambling: the winner makes enemies, the loser bewails his loss, one wastes one’s present wealth, one’s word is not trusted in the assembly, one is despised by one’s friends and companions, one is not in demand for marriage, because a gambler cannot afford to maintain a wife. (Walshe 463)

This sentiment informs the negative social perception in Burma of people who gamble or who are involved in gambling businesses. A few of my respondents told me that people who gamble are not trustworthy, and are more likely to deceive others and gain wealth unduly. It is interesting to note that in Burma all forms of gambling are illegal, except the monthly national lottery which is owned and run by the government. Playing the state lottery is not seen by the Burmese as gambling (Noe

Noe Aung). Activities such as playing a form of illegal lottery called “two-digit” or “three-digit” games and betting on football matches, however, are regarded as gambling. Therefore, in Burma, selling tickets for the two-digit or three-digit games is regarded as wrong livelihood.

In 2010, I interviewed a broker selling these illegal lotteries in Yangon. We shall explore below how he resolves such moral and social dilemmas encountered in his livelihood. Here, I wish to highlight how he interprets *sammā-ājīva*: for him, it is based on honesty and non-harm, i.e., not causing physical or mental pain to oneself or others. He told me that because gambling causes people to suffer mental pain and sorrow, his livelihood could never be *sammā-ājīva*.

Acknowledgement of their own moral imperfections seemed to be a common practice amongst my respondents in Burma. Only a minority of my respondents said that it is possible to make a living or engage in business without breaking any of the Five Precepts. More detailed inquiry into their reasoning revealed aspirations to practice good, honest business activities, alongside acknowledgements that, in practice, people rarely succeed in keeping all the precepts all of the time. Amongst Buddhists in Burma there is a notional acceptance of moral and ethical ideals, but they also recognize that, in practice, they compromise their moral ideals in the light of economic and moral imperfections.

A Buddhist Approach to Business Success

This section explores the Buddhist principles of a medium-sized wholesale business trading in agricultural produce called Swethaha, “Friends,” which was founded in 1980. Although its main business is in Pyay (formerly Prome), it also has branches in other locations, including Yangon. Its owner said that he tries to build his business in accordance the four

conditions for one's material welfare in life, which are discussed in the *Dīghajānu-(Vyagghapajja)-sutta* (AN 8.54). According to this discourse, happiness and success in life come from: (1) industriousness (*uṭṭhāna*); (2) watchfulness (*ārakkha*); (3) association with good, virtuous people (*kalyāṇamittatā*); and (4) leading a balanced life (*samajīvikatā*) (Harvey 189). He recalled his early working years in the 1980s.

When I first started out as a trader, I worked day and night. I got up at 2 o'clock in the morning and arrived to the supplier's house in a village at 4 o'clock before other traders got there. I also worked well into the night, finishing the daily book-keeping.

In addition to zealousness and industriousness, he regards it is essential to acquire wealth in accordance with the Buddha's teaching. For him, *sammā-ajīva* means avoiding of the five types of trade regarded as wrong livelihood. He said that he rejected a profitable business proposal in 1990 from a government official giving him a permit to build a brewery because he sees manufacturing and selling alcohol as morally wrong and causing harm to the wider society.

He, like many Burmese Buddhists, sees that karma, knowledge or skillfulness, and energy, known as *kan*, *nyan*, *wiriya* in Burmese, are the three factors necessary for one's success in life (Nash 162; Spiro 1165). For the Burmese, there are times when the karmic benefit is at its height: this is when the good karma (*kusalakamma*) from the past yields positive effects. When the karmic result is low, negative effects from bad karma done in the past arise. In other words, these times are what we might call the high and low points of one's life, but for the Burmese, they explicitly express them in terms of karma and karmic consequences. Although the Burmese attribute a great importance to the doctrine of karma, they also account for one's life chances by reference to one's skillfulness and energy.

My respondent explained the success of his first bean mill in terms of a combination of karmic consequences, entrepreneurial knowledge, and effort.

By November 1987, I finished building my first bean mill in Pyay. My previous [good] karma must have produced its positive effects at that time because at that time in 1988 there was a huge demand from Bangladesh for processed yellow split peas, and exporters of beans bought a large quantity of them from me. I also applied my entrepreneurial knowledge and effort to make it a success. So, I made a fair amount of profit and my business grew despite the revolution of 1988.

He reinvested the profit from his growing business by purchasing a rice mill in Shwe Taung, a town nine miles south of Pyay, at the end of 1988.

Although the political instability and economic uncertainty just after the suppression of the 1988 uprising increased the risk of his investment, he saw the acquisition of the rice mill as a safe way of protecting his wealth from the action of the state. As Harvey explains, the “attainment of watchfulness” (*āraṅkha-sampadā*) involves taking care with one’s possessions so that they are not lost by the action of kings (189). My respondent explained that he realized that holding money posed a greater risk than the risk involved in the new investment because he had seen how sudden demonetization schemes undertaken by the Ne Win’s government in 1963, 1985 and 1987 wiped out individuals’ wealth in an instant. These demonetization schemes reduced people’s confidence in the Burmese currency, making investment in land or gold/jewelry the safest forms of saving in Burma.

He also saw the investment in the rice mill as a good business opportunity because the Ne Win’s government in 1987 started liberalizing

the rice trade (Charney 145). Moreover, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which came into power in September 1988, began a program of market reform, liberalizing domestic and foreign trade, and promoting economic growth in private sector (Ford et. al. 19). The changing landscape of the Burmese political economy in the late 1980s and the early 1990s opened up business opportunities for traders. For him, the business venture in the rice mill paid off. In the 1990s, the business operations of Swethaha expanded gradually, establishing two wholesales divisions in Pyay trading in rice and beans/pulses. By 2002, it had opened another wholesale division trading in rice and a grocery in Yangon, while new manufacturing facilities for the production of rice and split yellow beans were built in Shwe Taung.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2010, Swethaha employed seventy-six people. Its owner had a hands-off style of management. Although he controlled key investment decisions and budget allocations, the day-to-day business decisions were made by managers and assistant managers. Each divisional manager was responsible for assistant managers, accountants, clerks, and laborers within their division. Managers at Swethaha started out their career as apprentices learning about the rice and bean trade and accounting, before they worked their way up to the managerial posts. It is a requirement for every new recruit to learn how to do the daily book-keeping and use its computerized accounting system. Its emphasis on accounting and the use of a computerized system were rare business practices for a Burmese medium-sized trading business.

Its owner explained that accounting and financial management play a crucial role in sustaining the success of his business, ensuring that outgoings and income are balanced. Having balanced outgoings and income is an aspect of leading a balanced life (*sama-jīvikatā-sampadā*) (Harvey 189). Moreover, his prudent attitude towards his wealth aligns with a

Buddhist approach to financial management as stated in the *Sigālovāda-sutta* (DN 31), which recommends that we should use a quarter of one's income or wealth for daily purposes, half for re-investment in one's work, and the last quarter for saving for adverse times. With such an emphasis on investment, Buddhist financial management encourages a forward-looking, prudent approach.

In terms of managing his employees, the owner of Swethaha had a paternalistic leadership style by taking care of his employees as a parent would. One of my respondents, the abbot of a monastery in Pyay, said that he is "like a parent to his employees, providing houses, health care and even cooking food for them." Such an account is consistent with my observations. Free accommodation and medical care were provided for all managers, assistant managers, accountants and clerks, and their immediate families. Moreover, I learned that he contributed 350 million Burmese *kyats* (35,000 US dollars) towards the fund for buying a house in Pyay for one of the managers, who had worked with him for thirty-one years. When I inquired about his generous behavior, he said, "I would like my managers to own a house. They have their own family and their children are growing up. I would like them to settle down in a place that is suitable for the family."

Interest-free loans were also provided to employees according to their salaries and wages. For the laborers, a welfare fund was set up, and two percent of their daily income would be saved in that fund for emergency expenses such as funerals. During my fieldwork in Pyay, the funeral of a laborer's wife took place, and 15,000 *kyats* from the welfare fund were contributed towards the funeral costs. The owner of Swethaha also gave 20,000 *kyats* from his own money for the costs. Moreover, the money saved in the welfare fund would be used for Buddhist ceremonies such as the annual robe offering ceremony sponsored by the laborers. In

addition to such fringe benefits, there are financial benefits such as annual bonuses that the employees enjoy.

According to the *Sigālovāda-sutta*, the duties of a good master towards his servants and employees are: assigning them work according to their strength, supplying them with food and wages, tending them in sickness, sharing with them unusual delicacies, and granting them leave at all appropriate times (Harvey 100). The *Sigālovāda-sutta* also describes that employees, in return, act dutifully by rising before him, taking rest after him, taking only what is given, doing their work well, and spreading about his good name and praise. A variety of training and welfare schemes provided for his employees at Swethaha therefore is indicative of his generosity and dutifulness as a good employer. We could suggest that his generosity is reciprocated by the employees. They do their work well, contributing to the success of the business that stretched over three decades.

The story of Anāthapindika presents an archetypal model for Burmese Buddhists. My respondent, the owner of Swethaha, regards that doing religious and social giving to the *Saṅgha* and less fortunate people, respectively, as well as investing in his employees as appropriate use of his wealth. In 1990, he performed religious giving to the *Saṅgha* by sponsoring the consecration of a sacred monastic boundary (*sīmā*) and the construction of a building within the *sīmā* at a monastery in the suburb of Pyay. Despite a lack of sufficient funding, he completed the *sīmā* project without having any financial difficulties. He said, “As I worked on the project and spent money on it, the profitability of my business somehow increased.” He attributed the increased profitability in part to his intention (*cetanā*) to complete the *sīmā* project. He explained his belief about the relationship between generosity (*dāna*) and its karmic benefit as follows:

Doing *dāna* because of the desire to get rich is wrong. It would be like misusing [the doctrine of] karma and the Buddha's religion. Mahagandayon Sayadaw [Ven. Janakābhivaṃsa]²⁰ said that it is best to set one's *cetanā* for the good of the whole *Saṅgha*, rather than for an individual monk. I therefore donated the *sīmā* for the benefit of the whole *Saṅgha*, and the *cetanā* I had for them brought about the positive karmic consequences.

His account highlights the subtleties of motives and karmic fruitfulness in relation to *dāna*. He, like many Burmese Buddhists, regards the donation of *sīmā* as the highest gift one could donate to a monastery, yielding the best karmic fruit. The higher ordination (*upasampadā*) ceremony in which one is ordained as a monk takes place in a *sīmā*; thus, it is seen as the birth place of future generations of the *Saṅgha*. The successful completion of the *sīmā* project in 1990 led him to the subsequent sponsoring of two additional *sīmā* projects in 2007 and 2010 at two different monasteries in Pyay. The financial success of Swethaha since the late 1980s made it possible for him to make such large donations to the *Saṅgha*. According to him, there is a virtuous circle of *dāna* in which increased religious and social giving leads to the accumulation of positive karmic fruit, which in turn generates more economic and social success in one's life, leading to more religious and social spending.

²⁰ Ven. Janakābhivaṃsa (1900-1977), who revived a famous teaching monastery called Mahagandayon Sathintike in Amarapura, 11 km southwest of Mandalay, wrote fifty-one books on Buddhist doctrines and practices, the Pāli commentaries, and monastic education. For detailed discussion on different types of *dāna* and their karmic consequences, see Janakābhivaṃsa (*Abhidhamma* 152-182).

Resolving Moral Dilemmas in Relation to Lying

While defining *sammā-ājīva* as any mode of livelihood that does not involve breaking the Five Precepts, my respondents do recognize the difficulty of keeping the precepts in their workplace, especially the precept to abstain from lying. An assistant sales manager of a hotel chain expressed the moral dilemmas that arise in her work as follows:

I do not think my work is *sammā-ājīva* because I have to tell lies. To attract customers I have to tell my clients that all rooms are of an exceptional standard, although they may in fact only be as good as rooms in other hotels It is impossible to do business without lying.

Another respondent, a manager of a firm that trades in beans, pulses, and rice, also acknowledged the impossibility of doing business without lying: “I sometimes exaggerate the quality of the products in order to increase sales.” Despite this, he still regards his means of livelihood as *sammā-ājīva*. He reasoned,

We trade in legal products [such as beans and pulses]. We use correct weights and measures. We also avoid trades in arms, intoxicants, humans, meat, and poison. Plus, in any business deals both the buyer and seller agree on the price and the quality of the products. It is therefore *sammā-ājīva*. Moreover, the presence of merchants goes back to the time of the Buddha.

In order to justify his profession as *sammā-ājīva*, he highlighted ethical aspects of his work such as the use of correct weights (honesty) and the avoidance of the five types of wrong livelihood. He also appealed to the authority of the Buddha in support of his profession. The story of two merchants, Tapussa and Bhalika, to whom the Buddha gave four hair relics, is well-known amongst the Burmese. It is said that the merchants

took the relics to Burma and enshrined them in what was to become the Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the most important Buddhist sites in Burma (Strong 76-80; Pranke and Stadtner 13-14). Although it is difficult to differentiate the use of marketing tactics from straight-out lying, these accounts highlight the moral dilemmas of false speech encountered in one's workplace and business activities, as well as those of complicity in lying (Harvey 188).

Resolving Moral Dilemmas in Relation to Stealing

The second precept covers abstaining from stealing, cheating, committing fraud or forgery, and falsely denying that one is in debt to someone (Harvey 70). Mahāsi Sayadaw Ven. Sobhana (1904–1982), the founder of Mahāsi Vipassana meditation tradition in Burma, summarized what breaking the second precept entails: “To cheat a buyer using false weights and measures, to fob off a worthless article on a buyer, to sell counterfeit gold and silver, [and] not to pay due wages or conveyance charges or customs or taxes, etc.” (Sobhana 1981 65, cited in Harvey 70).

The business community in Burma seems to be more tolerant of the breaking of the second precept than that of the fourth precept. My respondents told me that business people who deliberately break their promises, and double-cross business partners do not survive in the business community for long. Qualities such as keeping one's promise and loyalty are regarded by the Burmese as crucial for one's success in business and life. My respondents also emphasized that cheating and fraud not only destroy one's means of livelihood but that of others as well. For instance, a victim of fraud who had lost his wealth and livelihood explained that his loss of wealth in this current life was the result of his unwholesome karma from previous lifetimes.

Although the business community is not lenient towards fraud, some other forms of theft, such as the use of false weights and measures, as well as not paying due wages, customs, and taxes,²¹ are pervasive in Burma. These forms of theft seem to be more socially acceptable than that of fraud. According to one respondent, the use of false weights and measures is very common, to the extent that the weights sold in shops are produced to a false standard. He added,

The correct weights are not sold at shops. For my business, I had to order the correct weights from the producers because my policy is to use the correct weights in all business activities. For my wholesale business, I now use digital weights, which are more reliable than the manual weights.

The moral dilemmas of stealing also arise in relation to taxation. There are complex, moral issues surrounding Burma's tax system. Policy-making in general has been quite ad hoc, which has created economic uncertainties and instabilities, as discretionary policies make it more difficult to predict the outcomes of business investments.²² In terms of business planning, this style of policy-making increases risks for busi-

²¹ According to the *Vinaya*, "if there is a royal decree to demand a tax from those traveling through a particular place, a monk passing through the place without paying the due tax is guilty of theft" (Pandita *Intellectual* 620). Pandita shows that the moral category of theft regarding tax evasion is not so simple as it seems. For him, if there were a tax on common property such as air and if a monk thought it to be his own—from the perspective of the *Vinaya*—there is no offence in avoiding tax (621, f.n. 19).

²² McCarthy, working on foreign investment and economic liberalization between 1988 and 1998 under the military government, observes that regulations and procedures could change at "the whim of an official," creating an environment of uncertainty (243). A study on more recent economic reforms introduced by the Thein Sein government (2011-2015) also notes that "decision-making is ad hoc, yet based on a carefully-devised master plan" (International Crisis Group i).

nesses, which leads to higher investment costs. One consequence of these higher risks and costs is the pressure it creates to keep other expenditures low. In turn, this increases the incentive to negotiate for lower taxation.

Based on my observations in 2010 of the economic situation and the business community in Burma, tax regulations are complicated and outdated. Burma's central tax authority prioritizes taxes that are administratively more straightforward but cause greater distortions, such as those on export and import over those on income, business, or sales (International Crisis Group 4). In practice, there is no income tax, but there are taxes on all kinds of business, with a few exceptions, from big companies to medium-sized businesses to street-stalls.²³

Moreover, decision-making regarding tax rates and tax collection is largely delegated to regional tax officers. The tax rates vary according to the class of each town or region. For instance, corporation taxes and council taxes in Yangon are higher than in Pyay because the sales rate is assumed to be higher in a large city. This approach, in which regional officers have power and authority to change tax rates and influence tax collection, has opened channels for negotiations between tax officers and business people. This allows corruption to flourish, and weakens the system of checks and balances. Consequently, the government's actual income from taxation is always substantially lower than projected. The government's low tax take creates economic problems for the country as it contributes to the budget deficit in which current government spending exceeds total current revenue from all types of taxes in a given year.

²³ The Panama Papers, which show the ways in which the rich can exploit secretive offshore tax regimes, hold 16 names from Burma, including former dictator U Ne Win's son-in-law U Aye Zaw Win (Barron). The Panama Papers, 11.5 million files from the database of the world's fourth biggest offshore law firm, Mossack Fonseca, constituted the world's biggest data leak to date, published on April 15, 2016.

The tax system in Burma also encourages immoral conduct. Shwegyin Sayadaw (Htun Yee Vol. II 8-9) and Mahāsi Sayadaw (Sobhana 1981, 65, cited in Harvey 70) both held the view that excessive and coercive taxation breaks the second precept. The tax officers have the discretionary power to force excessive taxes on any business. The use of excessive and coercive taxation, and the negotiations between tax officers and business people inevitably involve breaking the second precept. The system of ad hoc tax rates and negotiations also sets a pattern of behavior for the broader business community in Burma. Not only are business people in Burma put under pressure to compromise their moral principles by the corrupt, imperfect tax system, but the example set by the authorities has created a vicious circle of corruption, and tax evasion now permeates Burmese society.

Resolving Moral and Social Dilemmas Encountered in a Gambling Business

In this section, we shall look at how the lottery broker, who makes his living by selling the illegal two-digit and three-digit lotteries²⁴ in Yangon, resolves dilemmas both moral and social that arise from his busi-

²⁴ The nature and networks of brokers of these illegal lotteries in Burma are complex to understand for an outsider. With three-digit games, players gamble on the last three digits of the Thai winning lottery numbers, which happens every fifteen days (Noe Noe Aung). The two-digit games involve people betting on the last two digits of the Thai stock market. This link to the stock market means that people in this industry work Monday to Friday, and their daily working hours are 8-10 a.m. and 2-4 p.m. Several similar lotteries ran in poor urban areas in the United States in the twentieth century called “the numbers game” or “the numbers racket.” In Cleveland in the 1950s, one of these also used stock market closing figures (Zotti 4-7). Moreover, some of these were run by various mafia groups in American cities (Kaplan and Maher 392), which meant that the operations and networks of brokers and bettors of these illegal lotteries were very vast and complex.

ness activities. Moral dilemmas arise from his business activities because he interprets *sammā-ājīva* as a mode of livelihood that is based on the concept of non-harm. When people lose their bets, their gambling is the cause of their suffering mental pain and sorrow. He also encounters social dilemmas because of the negative social perception in Burma of people who are involved in gambling businesses. The Burmese see gambling as a cause of social problems.

In order to resolve moral dilemmas, my respondent justifies his involvement in livelihood as *sammā-ājīva*, even if the livelihood itself is not, by saying that he is honest in his business activities. He explained, “Due to the nature of my work, I cannot lie when I take the bookings from my clients. Also, I must keep my promise to pay the due amount when the players win the bet.” Most business deals within this industry occur verbally: because this industry is illegal and operates in a black-market environment, there are no official invoices for the bets placed. Because of the industry’s illegal status, the police are able to penalize these businesses in a discretionary manner. My respondent reasoned that by keeping the second and fourth precepts, i.e., not lying and not stealing, he has won the trust of his clients and has sustained his livelihood for twenty years. He observed that, without keeping his promises, it would be difficult to retain clients and sustain his business in the long term. The irony is that in such an unstable, corrupt industry, being honest and keeping one’s word are crucial qualities.

In order to compensate for the ways in which his livelihood is a wrong livelihood in terms of its effects on people, he performs positive actions, such as acts of religious and social giving (*dāna*), chants protective chants (*paritta*) daily, and occasionally goes on meditation retreats. He performs religious giving weekly to the *Saṅgha*, and social giving every day to less fortunate people such as old people and physically and

mentally disabled people in his community.²⁵ In addition to these religious activities, he is involved in various social welfare projects. For example, he is a member of a youth group that is involved in finding possible blood donors and organizing blood donations for local hospitals. He explained his reasons for undertaking these religious and social activities as follows:

My earnings come from the commission that I get for placing the bet on behalf of my clients, who are street-stall keepers, laborers, florists, and nearly everyone from the community.²⁶ Since they experience sorrow [when they lose], I am living on the money of sorrowful people. I cannot live on such money without sharing with others They spend their earnings on the lottery, instead of spending it on *dāna* [religious and social giving]. So, I do daily *dāna* on behalf of my clients.

My respondent tried to find resolutions for the moral and social dilemmas that he encountered in his business by drawing on Buddhist teachings. He said that the teaching of the Buddha encourages him to do business activities from his heart with good intention (*cetanā*). He added, “Knowing the Buddha’s teaching and meditation puts my mind at peace whenever suffering arises.” He thus sought solace in Buddhism. Medita-

²⁵ He is a member of a youth group, which organizes weekly lunch offerings to approximately 600 monks during the rain retreats. The members of this group find funds for such *dāna* by asking for donations in the street, which is a common practice in Burma. They also organize the cooking and the offering ceremonies to the monks.

²⁶ It should be noted that a culture of gambling has developed in Burma over the last three decades. My respondents told me that about 80% of people in a given community in Burma either play the two-digit/three-digit lotteries or bet on football matches. The English Premier League is the most popular amongst the Burmese.

tion, in this context, is seen as an antidotal activity rather than as a primarily *nirvana*-oriented activity.

Resolving Moral and Social Dilemmas Encountered in the Entertainment Business

In the contexts of Burmese culture and Burmese interpretation of Buddhist ethics, the livelihood of actors, singers, and other “performers” (*tha-bin-thae* in Burmese) who work in the entertainment industry is generally seen as wrong livelihood. Here, we explore why Buddhists in Burma categorize the entertainment industry as wrong livelihood, and how people who work in that industry resolve moral and social dilemmas that they face because of their profession.

During my research in Burma in 2010, I interviewed two famous performers from a travelling stage performance group: the founder of the group, who has now retired, and his daughter, who is currently performing. The performers from such a group put on all-night shows, which are called *zat-pwe* in Burmese, performing comedy, melodrama (including the Buddha’s birth stories), traditional Burmese dance and modern Western dance, and singing traditional and pop songs. People refer to their line of work as *zat-tha-bin loka*, the “world of stage performance.”

The daughter gave a summary of how people perceive their livelihood:

People say that my work [as a performer] is unwholesome [*akusala* in Pāli] because it stimulates the growth of *kilesa* [defilements, i.e., greed, hatred, and delusion], and that we are intoxicating others with vices. Consequently, they say that performers [*tha-bin-thae*] will go to hell when

they die. As they say, I know that I will go to hell [after death].

There are several issues that I wish to examine here. Why are performances such as singing and dancing seen by the Burmese as unwholesome? What do people mean when they say that performances are stimuli for the growth of defilements (*kilesa*)? On what basis do people say that entertainers will be reborn in the realm of hell beings?

The Five Precepts do not prohibit people from singing or dancing or watching performances. However, the Buddhist code of moral discipline embedded in the Eight Precepts does include one concerning entertainment: the seventh precept is to abstain from dancing, singing, instrumental music, watching unsuitable shows, and from wearing garlands, perfume, and cosmetics.²⁷ The set of Eight Precepts lies between the basic Five Precepts and the set of Ten Precepts that govern people in monastic life, i.e., monks, nuns, and novices. They are kept by some laypeople on the holy days (*uposatha*), by some nuns, and by committed lay practitioners when, for example, they are on meditation retreats.

As Bhikkhu Bodhi observes, although the main purpose of the Five Precepts is to put a brake on immoral actions that are harmful to oneself and others, the basic purpose of the Eight Precepts is not so much ethical as spiritual (*Precepts* 36). Bodhi explains that the Buddhist moral discipline expounded in the Eight Precepts represents the transition from “*sīla* as a purely moral undertaking to *sīla* as a way of ascetic

²⁷ The Eight Precepts are abstaining from: (1) taking life; (2) stealing; (3) sex; (4) lying; (5) intoxicants; (6) eating at the wrong time (after noon); (7) dancing, singing, instrumental music, watching unsuitable shows, and from wearing garlands, perfume, and cosmetics; and (8) sitting or sleeping on high and luxurious beds and seats. Abstaining from singing, dancing, and watching shows is included also in the set of Ten Precepts, which is for male and female novices, monks, and nuns.

self-training aimed at progress along the path to liberation” (36). The progress along the Buddhist path and its ultimate goal of the attaining liberation from suffering depend on the attenuation and eradication of craving (*taṇhā*). Performances such as singing, dancing, and acting, and watching them are not in themselves regarded as immoral activities but as expressions of the craving that one has to keep in check if one is to advance to higher states of spiritual attainment.

It seems that in Burma the two purposes of the Buddhist moral discipline are conflated into one: that expressed explicitly in the Five Precepts to regulate immoral actions and that expounded in the Eight Precepts to reduce craving.²⁸ The Burmese *Saṅgha* from the reform Shwe-kyin sect, one of the Burmese monastic sects founded in the 19th century, have written poems and proverbs admonishing the people against the evil of performances and watching them. San-kin Sayadaw Ven. Candabhivaṃsa (1870-1971)—the ninth head of Shwe-kyin sect—wrote, “Seeking hell once a year [at] pagoda festivals in the realm of humans” (*Javana Tears* 16). Shwe-kyin Sayadaw Ven. Jāgara (1822-1894) saw people who hire and watch performances and people who perform at the pagoda festivals as “foolish,” warning them of their rebirth in hell (*Javana Tears* 17). For these reformists, performances at the pagoda festivals are not only sources of social ills such as drinking and gambling culture, but also obstacles to one’s progress along the Buddhist path. According to Metta-shin Sayadaw Ven. Javana, performances are “bones in one’s throat” (*Tears* 15), obstructing one’s spiritual pursuit and tarnishing the image of Burmese Theravada Buddhism. In this manner, Burmese Buddhists see activities concerned with entertainment as unwholesome.

²⁸ I thank Oxford Sayadaw Ven. Dhammasāmi for pointing this out. (Personal communication 24 August 2010).

It seems that, as notions of what constitutes Buddhism become essentialized in the modern period, we find arguments advocated by reformists that downplay or eschew certain cultural elements in Burmese Buddhism. We should also note that the negative social perception of entertainers in Burma applies more to people who work in the *zat-tha-bin* sector of the entertainment industry than those in the film and music sectors. In general, entertainers in the former sector are less well-off and thus tend to be in a lower social class. The social prejudice and bias towards people who work in the *zat-tha-bin* sector seem to come from the fact that they are more likely to be working class people. The main reason is not so much as ethical as social.

In terms of the view that performances are stimuli for the growth of defilements, some monks my respondent met have told her the importance of one's state of mind in watching shows.

Monks say that it [i.e., whether the shows stimulate the growth of *kilesa*] depends on the audience's state of mind, and that some monks in ancient times attained enlightenment while watching shows because they meditated on the vileness of the performers' bodies as they watched the show. For example, when I watch Britney [Spears], thinking "I like her singing, style, etc.," it is unwholesome. If I watch her performance with awareness of Dhamma [i.e., the nature of the reality] and reflect on the vileness of her body, it is better than before.

The narrative that one could attain enlightenment while watching a performance was also noted by Houtman in 1980s in Burma. One of his Burmese respondents believed that a painting showing an orchestra with people dancing with enjoyment to represent the orchestra and dancers as observed by Sāriputta and Moggallāna when they practiced the meditation on impurity (*asubha-kammaṭṭhāna*) (178). However, as Houtman

observes, most of the contemporary popular narratives are not supported by the scriptures (177). Moreover, the passage cited above suggests that one can change one's perception, and thus one can still gain wholesome credit by watching entertainment with awareness of the true nature of the reality.

The widely held perception that entertainers will be reborn as hell beings in the next life seems to have come from the *Tālapuṭa-sutta* (SN 42.2). The *Sanḅha* and laypeople in Burma often quote the *Tālapuṭa-sutta* as a textual authority to support their attitude towards the livelihood of entertainers. In the *Tālapuṭa-sutta*, a stage performer of a traveling theatrical group, Tālapuṭa, asked the Buddha three times whether it is true that performers who entertain large crowds of people are reborn amongst the laughing gods. After the third time, the Buddha answers Tālapuṭa that performers who are intoxicated with greed, hatred, and delusion, who are heedless, and who make others heedless, will be reborn in the laughter hell. The Buddha also tells Tālapuṭa that those who believe they will be reborn in the laughing heaven will either go to a hell or an animal realm for holding this wrong view.

Like the *Tālapuṭa-sutta*, the *Yodhājīva-sutta* (SN 42.3) is about the karmic result of one's livelihood. The professions—soldiery and entertainer—in these discourses are not included in the Buddha's list of prohibited occupations. For Keown, if the Buddha regarded participation in the military profession as inherently immoral, he would have denounced it as such and included it in the list of prohibited occupations (669 and 675). As Keown explains, when the Buddha in the *Yodhājīva-sutta* refers to soldiers who die in battle going to hell, he explicitly links this to a particular “misdirected” state of mind in which the motivation is to kill and destroy (671). Likewise, a careful analysis of the *Tālapuṭa-sutta* reveals the importance of the state of mind of performers and their intentions. As Tan explains,

[T]he guilty party consist of those whose motivation is rooted in greed, hate or delusion, the performers themselves, *and* [his italic] those who subscribe to such an idea. Implicitly, it means that this excludes those who perform shows or on stage with a mind of charity, loving-kindness, and wisdom. (*Tālapuṭa* 85)

Both of these discourses show that a person is not defined by one's profession (Tan *Yodhājīva* 19) but by how one actually does one's job.

In order to resolve moral and social dilemmas, my respondent explained her understanding of what right livelihood is as follows:

For me, *sammā-ājīva* is to do with one's intention. I have to sweat for my work. I invest physical and mental effort in my work. I do not have ill will towards anyone. . . . If a person does the job with bad intention, it is not *sammā-ājīva*. If the work is done with good intention, it is *sammā-ājīva*. You cannot say whether a profession is *sammā-ājīva* or not by looking at the title of a job. . . . For example, some monks and nuns have ill will and bad intentions towards other monastics or their donors. Then, their actions are in conflict with their livelihood.

The moral reasoning that underlies her perception of her livelihood draws on industriousness, one of the four conditions for one's material welfare discussed in the *Dīghajāṇu-(Vyagghapajja)-sutta* (AN 8.54) (see above). For her, the physical nature of her work in itself ennobles the activity. Like the lottery broker, her second moral reasoning is that on the basis of the positive intention her profession is not a wrong livelihood. We might then ask: (1) does that make it a right livelihood?; (2) does that lead to "ethical relativism" (Pandita *Intention* 2) in which morality of an action or a profession changes depending on context?

We should note that both the *Tālapuṭa-sutta* and the *Yodhājīva-sutta* give a similar caution that even to consider such wrong conduct—one who is intoxicated with defilements and makes others intoxicated or kills others—to be right livelihood is unwholesome, leading to hell or an animal rebirth (Tan *Yodhājīva* 20). Moreover, these discourses do not necessarily imply that the acts of intoxicating the audience or killing are morally justified. Pandita is right in saying that “a good king is termed “good” only because he is better than bad kings, not because he is morally pure person,” and that the only way for him to be morally pure is not to be a king (*Intention* 9). We could adopt the same attitude towards performers: good performers are better than bad ones; the only way for them to be morally pure is not to be performers.

In terms of “ethical relativism,” Pandita’s analysis of moral actions in relation to kingship and military service provides a nuanced assessment. As Pandita explains, there is only one mode of Buddhist ethic, which is “context-independent and non-negotiable” (*Intention* 2 and 6-7). This means the moral value of an action does not change. For example, killing is immoral, and saving life is moral. Pandita also highlights that there can be more than one, often conflicting, intentions associated with a moral action, and that a king or a soldier can perform both moral and immoral deeds (*Intention* 8-10).

Following Pandita’s stance (*Intention* 6), I would say that my respondents accept that the good can never be the bad, or vice versa, in any context. This is why I think they acknowledge the unwholesome aspects of their work and their karmic results, but they also point out the wholesome deeds associated with their business activities. For example, my respondent explained both moral and immoral deeds associated with her profession as follows: “Although my profession is unwholesome because it intoxicates the audience, I perform with good intention and loving-kindness. I also wish the audience good health and prosperity.”

The moral deeds that can be done by every performing entertainer as mentioned above are not the same as the positive actions such as *dāna* that one might do to compensate for their moral imperfections. The former arises simultaneously while doing the work, and the latter is usually done as a conscious effort to reconcile their moral and social dilemmas that they face because of their profession.

Although the *Tālapuṭa-sutta* seems to highlight the potential dangers of being a stage performer, the story of the monk Uggasena Thera in a commentarial text (DhA. iv. 59-65) shows that even a skillful acrobat could attain an *arhatship* while still performing regularly. Immediately prior to Uggasena's becoming an *arahat*, he had grown depressed and disappointed by the attention of his audience being diverted away from his performances to the Buddha. It might have been the psychological suffering from the decline in his fame that prepared him to receive the Buddha's teaching which transformed his life. The story of Uggasena suggests that a performer can become a noble person if there is a transformation of the mind from an unwholesome state to a wholesome state.

There are some resemblances between Uggasena's story and the life story of the founder of the travelling stage performance group, whom I interviewed. He had been a very famous stage performer in the 1980s and 1990s. He explained to me that, by the early 2000s, his fame and success had declined. This loss of fame and acclaim had led to a serious spiritual malaise. He said,

I was lucky to meet Ven. Jotika.²⁹ When I met him for the first time I was in a very bad state. Throughout our meet-

²⁹ Ven. U Jotika, also known as Maha-myyine Sayadaw (Pyin Ma Nar), is a well-known monk in Burma. He has authored many books on psychological development and emotional management from the perspectives of Buddhist doctrines. He also teaches Vipassana meditation.

ing, Sayadaw told me “to be mindful”. . . . Meeting Sayadaw [Ven. Jotika] changed my life for the better Now, I try my best to keep the Five Precepts and do meditation daily.

The story of Uggasena paints a positive ending for people who work in the entertainment industry and challenges the view that being a performer will inevitably lead to a rebirth in the realm of hell beings.

Conclusions

This article has explored different ways in which Buddhists in Burma attempt to resolve moral, spiritual, and social dilemmas related to their means of livelihood. There are three main approaches that they use to resolve their moral and social dilemmas: (1) the use of Buddhist teachings to interpret what *sammā-ājīva* means for them; (2) the use of positive actions such as *dāna* as “antidotes” to counteract their moral imperfections; and (3) the use of Buddhist meditation in order to find peace of mind in the midst of their business activities and of their moral imperfections.

We examined a range of interpretations by the Burmese of *sammā-ājīva*, which are informed by the detailed, complex knowledge my respondents seem to have of Buddhist texts and teachings. Their understanding of *sammā-ājīva* can be summarized as “practicing a good, honest livelihood with good intention.”

However, qualities such as “goodness” and “honesty” are subjective. For some of my respondents a good livelihood is not doing any of the five types of wrong livelihood; for others, it is about doing one’s work with qualities such as good intention, loving-kindness, compassion, and selflessness. For a few, *sammā-ājīva* is about doing the inevitable

tasks in any livelihood in an honest way. For instance, my respondent, the lottery broker, is scrupulous in repaying winnings in a system that is unregulated, which for him is about morality. These interpretations are different facets of the same aspiration, to be morally good.

Qualities such as honesty and truthfulness are, in the context of the fourth precept, also interpreted in varying ways. A minority of respondents sees the use of exaggerations and tactful use of market information etc., as still essentially honest. However, some people take a more literal interpretation of the fourth precept and see these exaggerations and marketing techniques as lying. According to Mahagandayon Sayadaw Ven. Janakābhivaṃsa, if one attempts deliberately to harm others through deceptive bodily and verbal actions, one will have unfortunate rebirths. However, if one lies because one does not want to give away one's possessions or to hide one's guilt, even though one still breaks the fourth precept, such lies do not result in unfortunate rebirths (Janakābhivaṃsa *Qualities* 215). Therefore, the breaking of the fourth precept is tolerated socially as long as it does not bring harm to oneself or others. Similarly, within the business community in Burma there is a high tolerance of the breaking of the second precept, stealing, so long as it does not reach to the degree of committing fraud.

Such a high tolerance in Burma of moral imperfections is perhaps crucial for the functioning of everyday activities, both in economic and social domains. People reflect on different aspects of their livelihood and business practice, analyzing whether their livelihood is *sammā-ajīva* in the way that they conduct it. People acknowledge weaknesses in their moral discipline and find compromises for their moral dilemmas through different means. Some people, like the manager of the trading firm mentioned above, break the fourth precept in their work activities but keep the other four precepts.

People also perform positive acts such as performing religious giving to monks and nuns and social giving to less fortunate people within their communities. In instances where the mode of livelihood is questionable from the perspectives of both Buddhist ethics and Burmese culture, the function of positive actions is antidotal. Several of my respondents used the Burmese word *hpay-say*, which literally means “antidote,” when they described how the Buddhist teachings and practices, including *dāna* and meditation, have helped them reconcile their moral and social dilemmas. In Buddhist traditions, this use of medical imagery to describe the Buddha’s teaching is common. For example, in the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism. XVI, 87), the Four Noble Truths are compared to a medical formula: “The truth of suffering is like a disease, the truth of origin is like the cause of the disease, the truth of cessation is like the cure of the disease, and the truth of the path is like the medicine” (Ñāṇamoli 520).

My respondents bring their understandings of Buddhist ethics and practices into their work activities. Drawing on other Buddhist concepts and on authoritative texts, they overturn common Burmese perceptions of their specific livelihood as unworthy. They also recognize that the benefits of incorporating Buddhist ethics and practices within their business activities include immediate business advantages, such as increased trust in work relationships and retention of staff and clients, as well as their own personal spiritual benefits.

For instance, the practice of *dāna*, the first of the ten perfections, is a crucial component of the Buddhist path to liberation from suffering. According to my respondents, the practice of *dāna* enhances one’s business performance because sharing one’s income and wealth through religious and social giving with different stakeholders such as employees and customers can strengthen interpersonal and business relationships. Better business performance, in turn, increases their economic resources and wealth, which allows them to do more *dāna*. It seems that as long as

one has made and used wealth as a beneficial instrument (Dhammasāmi *Wealth* 29), both wealth and *dāna* generate a virtuous circle of material and spiritual development that helps one along the Buddhist path.

In this article, I have applied descriptive Buddhist ethics to the study and analysis of the livelihood of and businesses managed by my respondents, demonstrating how they interpret and employ Buddhist ethics in their business activities and the management of their financial and human resources. We have seen a fundamental difference between the approaches of the existing scholarship on Buddhist economics and economic action in Burma, represented by the work of E. F. Schumacher and Melford Spiro respectively, and that of this article. The existing scholarship analyzes economic issues from the perspective of normative text-based ethics, examining what the goals of economic and public policy ought to be from a Buddhist perspective. The application of normative text-based ethics to the study of livelihood and economic behavior of Buddhists entails a tendency to judge individuals' behavior and decisions against certain standards, such as avoidance of the five types of wrong livelihood, generating a narrow interpretation of right livelihood within a business context. The approach of descriptive ethics used in this article is inclusive, recognizing that Buddhism is a part of the socio-political economy in Burma, and that Buddhist ethics accommodate a wide range of interpretations, beliefs, and practices.

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